

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

IRAN: THE CASE FOR DEMOCRATIC CONTAINMENT

by

Lieutenant Colonel Charles K. Hyde
United States Air Force

Captain John M. Crochet, USN
Project Adviser

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ABSTRACT

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This paper discusses the evolution of US policy towards Iran and makes recommendations for a policy based on the current political environment in Iran and the unique characteristics of the Iranian constitutional system, which has increasingly pitted reformist against hard-line theocrats. It proposes that by basing US policy on long-standing values we can avoid the mistakes of the past and realize our national interests in relation to Iran. This paper argues that policy options based primarily on regime change through military means, cooperative action and engagement are insufficient to accomplish the US end-state objectives and proposes a values-based policy of democratic containment. Democratic containment supports reform by depriving the theocratic regime of the propaganda, economic and political leverage needed to hold back the tide of a young reform-minded population while avoiding the pitfalls of preemption and engagement. While maintaining the high ground of US values, democratic containment repudiates past and present support for undemocratic Iranian regimes and returns US policy to its historic status as a shining city on a hill.

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IRAN: THE CASE FOR DEMOCRATIC CONTAINMENT

America shall be...a light unto the nations, a shining city on a hill.

— Ronald Reagan

An enduring adage has been that if you are going to lose a war, lose it to the United States. The price of defeat at the hands of the US has usually been the outpouring of American generosity and the extended hand of friendship in the post-conflict epoch. This unique phenomenon reflects the distinctive characteristics of American idealism, and was a constant theme in American diplomacy throughout the twentieth century. Periods of war have been followed by the Fourteen Points, United Nations, Marshall Plan and efforts to mitigate the use of force with actions that reflect our values of freedom, democracy, individualism and respect for human rights. Periods of power politics and realpolitik support for unsavory dictators, even when overwhelmingly supported at home and abroad, have torn at our national conscience, run counter to our foundational beliefs, and ultimately have been revoked with policies more in line with our national character. Unbridled passion caused by attacks on our nation has occasionally unfurled the latent wrath and power of our democracy, but our natural tendency to gravitate to values-based policies eventually dominates. American democracy, fortified with unyielding optimism, turns our passion into a search for a better world based on the equality of mankind and a belief in the human desire for liberty.

This force has been suppressed in the aftermath of 9/11, but it is regaining strength as the horrors of 11 September build into a call, not for the strengthening of oppressive, “pro-American” regimes, but for the spread of democracy throughout the Middle East. Just as World War I led to the Fourteen Points, the war on terrorism will lead to a more values-based approach, which will unleash the social, economic and governing powers of people as yet little-touched by the tide of democracy in the past thirty years. President Bush articulated this trend in his November 2003 speech to the National Endowment for Democracy advocating a Forward Strategy of Freedom in the Middle East. He concluded:

Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export. And with the spread of weapons that can bring catastrophic harm to our country and to our friends, it would be reckless to accept the status quo.¹

This strategic vision is consistent with the values that underpin our democratic institutions and recognizes the inextricable link between national values, our policies in the Middle East, and the defense of our homeland, prosperity, and way of life.

The problem with this vision is not that it puts America's "power at the service of principle"²—that is its greatest strength—but that it does not specifically address the regime in the Middle East where our conflicts have been poignant, our diplomatic separation most acute, and where, paradoxically, the potential for democratic success looms beneath the surface—The Islamic Republic of Iran. United States' national interests—limiting proliferation of nuclear technology and weapons of mass destruction (WMD), access to Persian Gulf oil, and promotion of the national values of human rights, freedom and liberty—are directly impacted by our relations, or lack thereof, with Iran. The critical nature of the Greater Middle East, the area from North Africa through Asian nations of Afghanistan and Pakistan,³ has been plainly demonstrated by the recent US involvement in military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq—operations which are slowly being incorporated into broader policies designed to promote values-based liberalization and economic growth in the region. These policies, however, are not a good fit for Iran, which acts as a barrier between US initiatives in south central Asia and the Middle East. This paper will discuss the evolution of US policy towards Iran and make recommendations for a policy based on the current political environment in Iran. It will further argue that by basing our Iranian policy on long-standing values we can avoid the mistakes of the past and possibly realize our national interests in relation to Iran.

RELATIONS WITH IRAN

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi became Shah of Iran in 1941 and remained in power until the 1979 Islamic revolution. In 1961, he led a "series of economic, social, and administrative reforms that became known as the Shah's White Revolution,"⁴ which included land reform and substantial economic growth based on Iran's large oil and natural gas resources. These reforms did not turn out for the ultimate good of the Iranian people as evidenced by the dissatisfaction which boiled over in 1979, culminating in the Shah's overthrow, the sacking of the US embassy, and the taking of 52 American hostages. The targeting of the United States by the revolutionaries who overthrew the Shah was a direct response to the unconditional and enthusiastic US support for a brutal dictator and was a repudiation of US policies that ignored US values for the sake of Cold War expediencies.

The US policy of supporting the Shah was grounded in the global bipolar confrontation of the Cold War and sustained by the desire to contain communism. The paradigm was "he may

be a crook, but at least he's my crook." In other words, the values-based objective of containing the Soviet Union and communist expansion resulted in a decision to use the means of an unsavory dictator for the greater good—the ends justified the means. The danger was that this approach weakened the moral and diplomatic foundation upon which the confrontation with the Soviet Union was based—the belief that individual freedom, liberty and democracy are superior to a system that tramples these values under state domination. The failure was not in the decision to ally with Iran against the Soviet Union—national survival dictated no less—but in a policy that supported and sustained dictatorial behavior contrary to our conscience without effective challenge. As the London Financial Times stated, "The US could see the dangers in his [the Shah's] insatiable appetite for arms and his authoritarian rule but did little to encourage reform."⁶ Power politics must sometimes be used and conflicting decisions made in a world without a supreme authority, but drifting too far from the liberal foundations of American foreign policy is usually a recipe for failure. The consequences of the Islamic Revolution, which toppled the US-backed dictator, have shaped our current relations with Iran.

The basic US policy toward Iran, following the severance of diplomatic relations in 1980 until the first term of the Clinton Administration, was containment. Clinton refused to support the region's pariah states, Iran and Iraq, opting instead "for dual containment in the hope that both would be prevented from further mischief until their regimes collapsed."⁶ Containment was strengthened in 1995 and 1996 when sanctions were added to curb Iran's WMD programs, support for terrorists groups and ardent opposition to the Arab-Israeli peace process. This policy continued until a gradual thawing occurred with the election of reformist Mohammad Khatami to the presidency of the Islamic Republic of Iran. With a reformist president and parliament challenging the theocratic domination of Iranian society and institutions, the US gradually moved toward limited engagement with Khatami in hopes of moderating extremist policies. To this end, some sanctions on Iranian imports were removed and steps were taken to resolve claims issues remaining after the break in diplomatic relations.⁷

In its first two years in office, the Bush Administration continued the Clinton policies of containment and limited engagement. Relations seemed to show slight improvement based on Iran's "tacit cooperation with the United States against the Taliban"⁸ after 9/11, the meeting of several Members of Congress with the Iranian UN representative in the fall of 2001, and the softening of official language justifying the annual continuation of the 1979 national emergency on Iran in November 2001.⁹ The incipient thaw, however, abruptly ended with the 2002 State of the Union speech in which President Bush declared Iran to be part of an "axis of evil." This characterization was based on Iran's attempts to acquire WMD, arms deliveries to the

Palestinian Authority that became public in January 2002, and increased “meddling” in Afghanistan.¹⁰ Although the State Department had “discussions with Iranian representatives on issues of concern”¹¹ in the subsequent months, the Bush administration ruled out the establishment of normal or improving relations based on four areas of unacceptable behavior:

- Iranian efforts to acquire nuclear weapons and other WMD
- Its support for and involvement in international terrorism
- Its support for violent opposition to the Middle East peace process, and
- Its dismal human rights record¹²

These areas reflect serious and long-standing value and policy differences from which the following objectives of US policy toward Iran can be deduced: prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons/WMD, curtail Iranian opposition to the Arab-Israeli peace process and support for Hizballah, and end human rights abuses. In turn, these objectives are integral parts of an ultimate objective, or end state—an Iranian government which derives its consent from the people, respects the rights of minorities, and joins the international community as a force for peace and stability.

Based on these objectives and given the super-charged environment resulting from the disputes and the political maneuvering over Iran’s nuclear program among the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Iran, Europe, Russia, and the United States, what future policy tack should the United States adopt? This question is difficult and compounded by the simmering emotional bitterness in the US Congress and public over the 1979 hostage crisis, the impact of the 9/11 attacks on US decisions, and the perceptions of US actions in Iraq as they relate to a policy of regime change enabled by military preemption. These environmental interactions pull US policy in different directions and result in three distinct policy options: preemption or preventative war, classic engagement, and democratic containment. With respect to Iran, the first two positions are not sufficient, do not reflect the current political reality in Iran, and do not rely on our great strength in relation to Iran—our liberal democratic traditions. Instead, a new policy of democratic containment is needed to achieve the desired end state.

POLICY OPTIONS

PREVENTATIVE WAR

The first option, preventative war, derives from the domino theory used to substantiate US actions in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. This “negative” theory postulated that if Vietnam fell to communist control it would trigger an unstoppable chain reaction by which other states would succumb to communist domination. The present theory can be deduced from US

policy actions in Afghanistan and Iraq; the United States will use the military power in the Greater Middle East to remove rogue regimes that support terrorism and pursue WMD in order to build momentum for democracy in the region. This “positive” domino theory, which places a high reliance on military means, reached its zenith after the successful toppling of Saddam Hussein and conclusion of major combat operations in Iraq in 2003. However, the slow progress of Iraqi political liberalization and stability due to a stubborn insurgency has all but removed the zeal for any policy that would advocate an Iranian regime change through military action. Furthermore, the increasing demands of Iraqi security and stability operations significantly limit the ability of US military forces to take on a larger regional foe without unacceptable risks to the United States’ global security.

A more-likely corollary to regime change is a policy option that satisfies the US national interest of limiting proliferation of nuclear technology and WMD through preemptive military strikes on Iran’s developing nuclear capabilities. This would appear to be in line with the 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS), which postulates that traditional concepts of deterrence are not sufficient to prevent attacks that have the ability to achieve WMD-type effects. In a less than subtle warning to the “axis of evil”, the strategy states the “overlap between states that sponsor terror and those that pursue WMD compels us to action.”¹³ This warning is followed by the preemption doctrine—in order to prevent imminent dangers and “hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively.”¹⁴ In light of the significant impact of 9/11 and faced with an increasing threat from terrorists or rogue states with the capability to achieve WMD-like effects and transfer their knowledge to terrorist groups, the current administration views preemption as a viable and sometimes necessary means to achieve national objectives. Preemption, however, must pass tests established in the NSS, and in the case of Iran, also be an appropriate means to achieve the desired end state. The NSS implies the threat must be imminent even though the time and place of attack is uncertain, and it further declares that the “United States will not use force in all cases to preempt emerging threats, nor should nations use preemption as a pretext for aggression.”¹⁵

Based on this conditional nature of preemption in the NSS, preemption would not be a viable option for Iran. First, Iran’s nuclear program, if unchecked, will not produce a nuclear weapon until 2007 according to French and British sources, and a worst-case estimate by the US National Intelligence Council placed the earliest possible date at the end of 2005.¹⁶ These dates, although near, are not sufficient to justify a preemptive strike on Iranian nuclear facilities, especially given the international nonproliferation effort being conducted under the auspices of the IAEA and the tripartite diplomacy of Great Britain, Germany and France. These diplomatic

initiatives increased IAEA inspections of Iranian nuclear facilities and had limited success in increasing the transparency of Iranian nuclear programs. The intense international focus on Iran and the consistent US demands for the IAEA to declare Iran to be in non-compliance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and refer the issue to the United Nations Security Council have undoubtedly slowed Iran's nuclear progress and extended the timeframe for crossing the nuclear weapon threshold. A preemptive attack would further damage relations, already strained over US actions in Iraq, with western friends, remove all incentives for Iran to cooperate with IAEA mandates, and condemn on-going diplomatic efforts to failure. Furthermore, an attack would probably be the catalyst for the worst-case scenario of an Iranian withdrawal from the NPT and a blitz drive to build a nuclear weapon.

Second, would-be nuclear powers have learned from the 1981 Israeli preemptive attack on an Iraqi nuclear facility. After the attack, Iraq used multiple, dispersed sites and clandestine methods to hide a nuclear program whose scope was not fully revealed until Iraq was forced to accede to IAEA inspections after the 1991 Gulf War.¹⁷ Recent disclosures revealed that Iran maintained two undeclared nuclear processing facilities, and subsequent IAEA on-site inspections exposed an Iranian uranium enrichment program—a process that can produce fuel for power generation or nuclear weapons.¹⁸ This generated speculation that Iran's nuclear power program may cover for additional undeclared sites that are as yet undetected. Conducting a preemptive attack against dispersed Iranian nuclear facilities, some of which may have peaceful purposes and are located in the densely populated city of Tehran,¹⁹ is not guaranteed to eliminate Iran's budding nuclear weapon's capability. In addition, such a course of action would create a backlash among regional Islamic populations and governments, and more importantly, generate support for the ruling theocrats as Iranians "rally around the flag" in the wake of US attacks. Ray Takeyh accurately described this effect of preemptive military action by stating, "The prevailing acrimony between Tehran and Washington serves to bolster the hardliners who have long viewed conflict with the 'Great Satan'...as the most effective manner of re-igniting revolutionary fires."²⁰ A policy, which relies on military power via the means of preemptive strikes to eliminate Iran's nuclear capability, would strengthen the control of the theocratic rulers and undermine the democratic reformers in Iran. This would set a divergent course from the desired end state by attacking the symptom instead of the underlying cause of unacceptable Iranian behavior—the ruling, hard-line theocrats.

ENGAGEMENT

The predominant, alternative view among Iranian scholars is the US should adopt a policy of engagement with Iran similar to the European Union. This approach would fortify economic ties, strengthen the multilateral systems of arms control and the NPT,²¹ and sustain political engagement with the Iranian government.

The first aspect of this trilogy, economic engagement, postulates that close economic ties with Iran will stimulate the political reforms that naturally flow from a market economy. Fareed Zakaria, speaking of Islamic Middle Eastern states expressed this view:

The more lasting solution is economic and political reform. Economic reforms must come first, for they are fundamental...economic reform means the beginnings of a genuine rule of law...openness to the world, access to information, and perhaps most important, the development of a business class.²²

This view undoubtedly has merit in the greater Middle East, but does not easily apply to Iran due to the corruption and binding linkages between the ruling clerics and an economic system that serves as a prop for their suppression of social and governmental reform. Trade and manufacturing are controlled by *bonyards*, a quirky mixture of religious, charitable and government organizations, which have transformed into massive holding companies that dominate "key industries while evading competition, taxes and state regulations."²³ The *bonyards* are the antithesis of a liberal market economy and reform is unlikely because the beneficiaries of the system are the same hardliners who perpetuate the behaviors that are incompatible with US policy objectives. The ruling elite are not likely to change based on economic engagement because the economic liberalism that reforms are reported to create would undermine their control over an increasingly restless population whose will has been thwarted in the political process.²⁴

Multilateral engagement on the Iranian nuclear problem is a converging area of interest for US and European policy makers. A nuclear-armed Iran, which actively supports terrorists groups opposed to the Middle East peace process and is developing a ballistic missile with the potential to reach southern Europe,²⁵ is not a positive development on either side of the Atlantic. Second, the often-volatile relationship between Sunni and Shia Muslims is definitely a concern to the predominately Sunni Gulf States as they keep a wary eye on Iran. The introduction of nuclear weapons to this long-standing religious quarrel would provide a dangerous incentive for Sunni Islamic states to acquire nuclear weapons as a deterrent to Iranian aggression and influence. European and US policy makers share the desire to maintain a stable Persian Gulf and prevent nuclear proliferation that would undoubtedly destabilize the region and place energy supplies at risk. Finally, Iran is the most bellicose Islamic state in its denunciation of

Israel, and Supreme Leader Khamenei “has continued to call Israel a ‘cancerous tumor’ and make other statements suggesting that he seeks Israel’s destruction.”²⁶ An Iranian nuclear weapon would make this possible and could reverse the positive trend toward resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian problem occasioned by the death of Yasser Arafat. In this regard, transatlantic leaders share a common goal of preventing an Iranian nuclear weapon, which would threaten Israel and thereby undermine the Middle East peace process.

The US should remain sensitive to these areas of common interest in relation to Iranian policy and should maintain the international pressure on Iran by working through the IAEA to ensure compliance with the NPT and the Additional Protocol (AP) Iran signed in December 2003. The AP provides increased transparency of Iran’s nuclear program by allowing additional IAEA technical inspections of nuclear facilities in order to decrease the likelihood that civilian nuclear power programs serve as a facade for illicit weapons activity. This fear became reality in 2003 when, prompted by dissident and media reports, IAEA investigations revealed highly enriched uranium particles at previously undisclosed Iranian facilities and an “alarming amount of progress” in its [Iran’s] uranium enrichment program and, therefore, in its nuclear weapons program.²⁷ The AP was designed to limit the ability of Iran to move beyond peaceful nuclear purposes and shore up NPT safeguards that were mere speed bumps to states intent on acquiring nuclear weapons.

International cooperation and convergence on Iranian nuclear weapons, however, is not a panacea. The ability of Iran and previous states to circumvent, hide and deceive the international community in regards to nuclear programs and intentions should serve as a warning. Multilateral cooperation to limit proliferation of nuclear weapons, though valuable, is not guaranteed effective and is not a likely method to achieve the end state desired by US policy. Iran’s pursuit of a nuclear program derives from the Shah’s vision for twenty nuclear reactors in 1974,²⁸ and Iran’s enrichment activities—the present concern in relation to nuclear weapons—have been active for 18 years.²⁹ Thus, the Iranian drive for nuclear weapons is longstanding, predates US actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and will likely continue using US strategic encirclement as a proximate excuse. Nuclear weapons for Iran are analogous to the US space program—a source of national pride and accomplishment—which can be used by the theocrats to rally the population against the United States and tighten their tethers of power.

Despite this negative assessment, the multilateral approach should not be discarded. The efforts of the IAEA and the British-French-German diplomatic forays have focused on limiting Iran’s enrichment capability and securing nuclear fuel. Recent agreements allow Iran to purchase nuclear fuel for its Bushehr power plant from Russia provided spent fuel is returned for

reprocessing;³⁰ this eliminates the need for Iranian uranium processing and enrichment, which are key dual-use steps in the nuclear fuel cycle. The agenda for US non-proliferation policy should be to balance Iran's nuclear power aspirations, legitimate under the NPT, while denying dual-use technology and enrichment, which can be used for weapons development. This effort, however, should not be viewed as an end in and of itself. Decades of European economic and political engagement have not prevented the recent, frightening revelations about Iran's nuclear weapon's program, and "companies in Germany, Switzerland, Austria and other countries in western Europe have been investigated"³¹ as part of a global nuclear black market. In fact, only sustained and consistent diplomacy by the US over the past decade has prevented Russia, China and other nations from providing key nuclear assistance to Iran. The only method likely to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons is to achieve the desired end state of an Iranian government which derives its consent from the Iranian people, respects the rights of minorities, and joins the international community as a force for peace and stability.

The final part of the engagement trilogy is the recommendation by many experts for direct political engagement with the Iranian regime. Political engagement is a mistake for two reasons. First, it is contrary to US values because it supports a hard-line government that has one of the most despicable human rights records in the world.³² Direct engagement on a broad front would forgo the high ground of American idealism and directly undermine the efforts of the reformers who have risked imprisonment and death at the hands of the theocrats. While rejecting the policies of current leaders who underwrite the domination of Ayatollah Khomeini, the reformers would most certainly recoil from policies that bring up memories of US support for the Shah's oppression. Second, direct engagement that leads to closer economic ties would extend the life of the corrupt and failed economic methods of the theocrats, and in effect, prop up the *bonyard* system whose reform would result in a significant loss of political power. Rather than leading to democratic change, engagement would perpetuate clerical rule and provide external legitimacy to counter increased dissatisfaction and declining internal support.

DEMOCRATIC CONTAINMENT

The policy option that has the best long-term chance of achieving US goals is democratic containment. This approach exploits the Iranian political system by containing the theocratic regime and indirectly supporting an internal reform movement. It continues multilateral nonproliferation efforts while avoiding the false hopes of engagement. Most important, it is consistent with US values and the desired end state.

Democratic containment begins with the unique entity that is Iran. US containment since 1979 has been based upon the narrow perception that Iran is a theocratic dictatorship with an anti-US worldview. This outlook ignores the reality of a young population, seventy-five percent of which is under twenty-five,³³ active in a unique democratic process, and increasingly disenchanted with the failed promises of the ruling theocratic elites. Proponents of US engagement believe the best path to a reformed Iranian state is through these elected reformers and the generation born after the 1979 Islamic revolution. Democratic containment, on the other hand, recognizes that both of these groups, theocrats and reformers, function within a distinctive political system that influences policy options and potential outcomes.

The Iranian constitution, adopted after the Islamic revolution, divides power between elected and unelected institutions. Developing a successful policy toward Iran requires an understanding of these unique governmental structures and how they impact the struggles between reformers and theocrats as evidenced in the recent elections. The Iranian government is organized according to Figure 1.

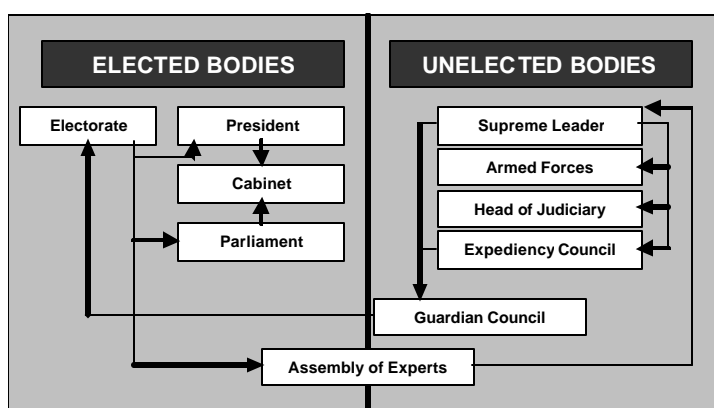


FIGURE 1. IRANIAN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS³⁴

The Supreme Leader, the most powerful religious and political figure in Iran, attains his influence through constitutional provisions which give him control of the judiciary, armed forces, and Expediency Council, an appointed advisory body. He indirectly controls the Guardian Council, the most important political institution, by directly appointing half of its members and influencing the selection of the remainder. The Guardian Council gains its power by vetting every candidate for elected office and exercising veto power over legislation passed by parliament. This insures elected institutions do not usurp the primacy of Islamic Law and the unelected institutions.³⁵

Unlike most political systems in the Greater Middle East, the unelected governmental bodies in Iran represent only half of the political mosaic. Democracy, if defined by rule of constitutional law and overtly supported elections, is an established part of the Iranian political landscape. The elected component of the Iranian government is real, reflects multiple perspectives and has been widely viewed as the potential source of a more liberal regime. The fact that this has not happened should not denigrate the aspirations of the Iranian people, Iran's constitutional and democratic processes, or the reformers who confront the theocrats within the existing political system. Instead, it should influence our assessment of the recent political events based on the reality that Iran does not fit the paradigm of either a Western Democracy or an Islamic dictatorship. Beeman explains:

Every election in Iran in the last twenty years has been free, and has followed the prescribed electoral process to the letter. The problems that have arisen in the country are related to the fact that half of the institutions in the Iranian government are unelected, and these institutions have veto power over the elected institutions. Furthermore, the army and the judiciary are both controlled by these unelected bodies.³⁶

President Khatami seemed to usher in a new era of more moderate policies after his 1997 election and 2001 reelection. Khatami's victory, along with a majority of reformists in parliament, spurred a conflict within the government between the reformers, led by Khatami, and the ruling theocrats, led by Supreme Leader Khamenei. This conflict resulted in nullification by the unelected Guardian Council of reform legislation passed in parliament, the shutting down of newspapers, and the imprisonment of opposition leaders. The conservatives carried the day and Khamenei, the supreme leader, flatly rejected reform measures aimed at ending cleric domination and a role for the individual in determining state policies.³⁷

This political tug of war further manifested itself in the 2003 municipal elections when public dissatisfaction with the reform movement resulted in massive defections from the electoral process. Nationwide only 16 of 41 million voters cast ballots and only 12 percent of Tehran's voters, traditionally the most reform minded, went to the polls in a nation that usually has 70 percent participation.³⁸ The political conflict came to a head in the 2004 parliamentary elections when clerics in the Guardian Council trumped the democratic process by eliminating over 2,000 reformist candidates and approving mostly conservative candidates. Voters showed their displeasure with 50 percent going to the polls—a 15 percent drop—and only 30 percent of the key Tehran electorate casting ballots.³⁹

Many pundits hailed this as a fatal blow to the democratic movement and a triumph for the hardliners, but the result may show cracks in the legitimacy of the theocratic regime. The

revolutionary clerics devised a constitution with substantial democratic aspects under their control in order to gain internal legitimacy and justify government actions in the international community. The theocratic government used limited democracy as a pressure relief valve to substantiate their power and maintain control of a population that in the words of one author is, "Organized, hostile to the regime, pro-democratic, and pro-American."⁴⁰ The clerics initiated a democratic expectation, and for the first time resorted to overt abolishment by the Guardian Council of candidates with significant popular support. The reform-minded population voted with their feet, refusing to participate in a system that was no longer responsive to their views, and abandoned fence-straddling reformists who were unable to effectively confront the theocrats. The public rejected the clerics and the reformers who failed to deliver on promises of governmental reform. Rather than representing a hardliner victory, by suppressing the elections "Iran's conservatives have undermined the country's elected institutions and dispelled the prospects for theocracy to be reformed through its own constitutional provisions."⁴¹ This undermines the legitimacy of the ruling clerics and has led to threats from reformists in parliament to resign and disengage from the democratic process.⁴² If the Iranian elected political system ceases to function or loses its relevance with the population, the theocrats will have gained a pyrrhic victory and created opportunities for US policy makers.

Although the environment is complex and bound up with tensions based on nuclear weapons, democratic containment will eventually lead to better relations with Iran and the attainment of US objectives. As previously detailed, it consists of multilateral efforts to contain Iran's nuclear program and prevent proliferation of nuclear weapons. It continues President Bush's proposals to modify the NPT in order to close the "nuclear enrichment loophole" which has been used by North Korea and Iran to produce dual-use nuclear material under the guise of a civilian nuclear program.⁴³ This modification would require the world's leading nuclear exporting states to provide reliable access to nuclear fuel for civilian reactors, so long as receiving states renounce enrichment and reprocessing--activities which are currently allowed under the NPT and exploited to develop nuclear weapons.⁴⁴ In addition, democratic containment would continue efforts, such as the Proliferation Security Initiative, to dismantle the black market trade in nuclear technology. These efforts would build international trust and reduce the backlash of perceived future US unilateral military actions, which constitute a rallying cry for Iranian hardliners trying to prop up their regime with anti-US appeals.

Democratic containment would by necessity limit direct US government contact with the political opposition, whereas previous limited engagement was directed toward reform elements in the government. The hardliners' successful effort to unhinge reform has damaged their

legitimacy, but it has also presented them with an opportunity to unseat public support for democratic reformers. Direct US interaction with the opposition would empower clerical oppression and allow theocrats to marginalize reformists by portraying them as puppets of an anti-Iran US policy. The strategy of the hardliners is to use the US military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, both of which benefited Iran by removing hostile Sunni governments, to bolster their legitimacy. By portraying the US as a threat, the ruling clerics can rally support against a common enemy, deflect criticism of their own domestic failings, and taint the reform movement by association with the United States. A value-based policy would not forsake those who seek freedom, but would support them through institutions not directly connected with the US government. US labor unions, women's rights groups, human rights organizations, and democratic foundations, operating with their international equivalents, will have a better success buttressing individual rights and democratic initiatives than official government contact which would marginalize Iranian reformers.

An example of this indirect approach was the awarding of the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize to Shirin Ebadi, a female Iranian lawyer, professor and human rights activist. Her case shows the influence international organizations can have on a theocratic regime. Ebadi was jailed for challenging the conservative regime on issues such as the rights of women and children, the Islamic penal code and other discriminatory laws, but despite this persecution, she prevailed as a spokesperson for Muslim women. Her success empowered Iranian non-governmental organizations and linked their cause to international covenants and conventions.⁴⁵ This is significant because pressure to improve human rights, applied by global organizations and pursued locally by the first Islamic woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, will arguably have significantly more impact than unilateral US pronouncements⁴⁶ and will not contribute to the Iranian hard-liners' strategy of marginalizing reformers based on perceived US influence.

Furthermore, US and western feminist groups support similar international organizations and conventions as their Iranian counterparts, and although they do not have the same objectives as US policy, these groups can be effective at spreading western ideas of freedom, democracy, human rights and rule of law, which indirectly contribute to US objectives. McFaul and Milani argue that a similar approach contributed to success in Poland. They contend that international labor unions and religious organizations formed common bonds, connected the Polish and western societies and helped spur Poland's democratic reforms.⁴⁷ While Iran is far different from Poland, such an indirect approach is required in order to support liberal reformers while avoiding the pitfalls of direct US involvement.

Finally, US political and economic engagement policies in the rest of the Middle East do not apply to the unique conditions in Iran. These policies seek to build civil societies, develop market economies, and encourage building-block constitutional reforms and elections in order to promote gradual political liberalization. This gradual approach is desired because of the fear that radical Islamists, who have an organizational advantage over fledgling civil institutions in many undemocratic Middle East states, would win a popular election. There is no such fear in Iran. Without US engagement, Iran has developed democratic institutions and an electorate that, if not pro-American, is at least keen about individual freedoms, democratic process and economic reform.

CONCLUSION

Democratic containment can achieve the desired end state of an Iranian government which derives its consent from the Iranian people, respects the rights of minorities, and joins the international community as a force for peace and stability. Democratic containment deprives the theocratic rulers of the propaganda, economic and political leverage needed to hold back the tide of a young reform-minded population by avoiding the false hope of direct engagement. It also avoids the pitfalls of a policy based on the military instrument of power to compel regime change. Democratic containment takes the long view. It recognizes that political and economic engagement with an abusive and corrupt regime does not support our values and only perpetuates the unacceptable behavior of the regime. It also recognizes that direct aid to Iranian reformers allows the theocrats to label the opposition as collaborators with the enemy and reduces their influence. Democratic containment recognizes the dual nature of the Iranian political system by firmly opposing the regime while indirectly supporting indigenous reformers. While maintaining the high ground of US values, it repudiates past, present and future support for undemocratic Iranian regimes and returns US policy to its historic status as a shining city on a hill, which casts its rays of hope, prosperity and freedom to a like-minded Iranian citizenry. With persistence and consistency, democratic containment will prevail, and we will witness the fall of the Iranian Theocratic Wall that separates the Iranian people, every bit as much as the Berlin Wall symbolically and literally separated the people of Eastern Europe, from freedom.

WORD COUNT = 6,000

ENDNOTES

¹ George W. Bush, "Freedom in Iraq and the Middle East," *Hampton Roads International Security Quarterly* IV, no. 3 (2004): 11.

² Bush, 11.

³ Sidney E. Dean, "Joint or Parallel? American and European Approaches Toward the Greater Middle East," *Hampton Roads International Security Quarterly* III (July 2004): 5-6 [database on-line]; available from ProQuest; accessed 16 September 2004.

⁴ Department of State, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, "Background Note: Iran," August 2004; available from <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5314pf.htm>>; Internet; accessed 17 January 2005.

⁵ Lawrence Freedman, "The Tough Task of Containing Iran," *Financial Times* (London), 15 September 2004, Comment, p. 21 9825 words) [database on-line]; available from Lexis-Nexis; accessed 15 September 2004.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Kenneth Katzman, "Iran: Current Developments and US Policy," Issue Brief for Congress, Congressional Research Service Web, 25 April 2003, 8; available from <<http://www.fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/20242.pdf>>; Internet; accessed 4 October 2004.

⁸ Ibid., summary page.

⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰ Ibid., 8.

¹¹ Department of State, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, September 2002), 15.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Wyn Q. Bowen and Joanna Kidd, "The Iranian Nuclear Challenge," *International Affairs* 80 (March 2004): 263.

¹⁷ Federation of Atomic Scientist, "IAEA and Iraqi Nuclear Weapons," 3 November 1998; available from <<http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/iraq/nuke/iaea.htm>>; Internet, accessed 8 Oct 2004. This document details the success of IAEA in unmasking the Iraqi nuclear program, many parts of which were unknown prior to the Gulf War and therefore unharmed by coalition military attacks.

¹⁸ Paul Kerr, "IAEA Says Iran Failed to Disclose Key Nuclear Activities," *Arms Control Today* 34 (March 2004): 26.

¹⁹ Bowen and Kidd, 260. In 2003 the Iranian government confirmed, after numerous media reports, the Kalaye Electric Company in Tehran was used to manufacture uranium enrichment centrifuges. Environmental samples taken at the facility by IAEA inspectors revealed traces of highly enriched and low-enriched uranium.

²⁰ Ray Takeyh, "Iran: From Reform to Revolution?" *Survival* 46 (Spring 2004): 140.

²¹ Bowen and Kidd, 268.

²² Fareed Zakaria, "Islam, Democracy, and Constitutional Liberalism," *Political Science Quarterly* 119 (Spring 2004): 16.

²³ Takeyh, 136.

²⁴ Takeyh, 136

²⁵ Katzman, 2-5. Documents Iranian development, with Russian assistance, of ballistic missiles. In March 2002 the US intelligence community upgraded the missile threat from Iran and projected the US would "most likely" face an Iranian intercontinental ballistic missile threat in 2015. Iran maintains about 150 Revolutionary Guards in Lebanon to coordinate arms delivery to Hizballah.

²⁶ Katzman, 5.

²⁷ Robert J. Einhorn, "Curbing Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East," *Arms Control Today* 34 (March 2004): 12.

²⁸ Bowen and Kidd, 258.

²⁹ Bowen and Kidd, 259.

³⁰ Bowen and Kidd, 261.

³¹ Bowen and Kidd, 262-263.

³² Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "Iran: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices--2003," 25 February 2004; available from <<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2003/27927.htm>>; Internet; accessed 17 January 2005.

³³ William O. Beeman, "Elections and Governmental Structure in Iran: Reform Lurks Under the Flaws," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 11 (Summer-Fall 2004): 64.

³⁴ Ibid 57.

³⁵ Ibid, 61.

³⁶ Ibid., 56.

³⁷ Ibid., 56.

³⁸ Takeyh, 133.

³⁹ Michael McFaul and Abbas Milani, "Solidarity with Iran," *Hoover Digest*, no 2 (Spring 2004): 63.

⁴⁰ McFaul and Milani, 66.

⁴¹ Takeyh, 131.

⁴² Takeyh, 138. On hundred reformist members of parliament warned that continued obstructionism by the religious conservatives would lead the theocratic regime to the same fate as the Taliban and Baghdad regimes.

⁴³ Wade Boese, "Bush Outlines Proposals to Stem Proliferation," *Arms Control Today* 34 (March 2004): 24.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Mahmood Monshipouri, "The Road to Globalization Runs through Women's Struggle: Iran and the Impact of the Nobel Peace Prize," *World Affairs* 167 (Summer 2004): 8-9. Monshipouri contends, "The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Ebadi empowers her to further expose the inherent contradictions of Iran's conservative ideology." He further argues that the Nobel Prize opens the door to internal debate on social issues that are supported by Iranian human rights groups such as the Organization for Defending the Victims of Violence, which has argued that the internal rights of women and children are directly linked to the concepts of external peace and security. Moreover, he states, "Islamic feminists generally support international human rights covenants and conventions, especially the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women."

⁴⁶ An example is the annual State Department report on human rights.

⁴⁷ McFaul and Milani, 67.

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